

## TIME MARCHES ON

(A story based on fact having happened in the very early days of Physiotherapy in South Africa.)

By MARY G. DOBEYN,

(Concluded from December, 1959)

"**M**ORE admittances, more out-patients, more work—but no more staff," Barrington told his wife a week later. "It's the same story in every department: "Baas, put my leg in the wonderful machine." It looks as if I'll be working flat out for months."

Elizabeth Barrington looked hard at her husband.

"You wouldn't be trying to tell me that you're postponing your vacation again?"

"I'm sorry, darling, but that's the way it's beginning to look."

She sighed half humorously: "When I think of those four glorious weeks we were going to have in the Berg . . ."

"Me too. But what a great thing it is! For the first time we're really getting the confidence of the natives. We estimate that up to now maybe a third of the people who need treatment have been coming to us. The other two-thirds have been sending for Nonhla Kanipho and the other wizards. Now we've reversed those proportions."

"It is wonderful isn't it?" Elizabeth agreed. "I could almost give up being sorry about that vacation . . . But is it going to last? Are the natives really sold on the scientific approach to disease?"

"Scientific approach nothing! As far as they're concerned it's all magic. Only our magic has suddenly come to look better than theirs."

For another two weeks the rush of ailing natives continued. Not only the sick came to the hospital. Healthy men and women walked for miles to submit to the strange machine that could make even a witch-doctor's leg move when she didn't want it to. Barrington sent them home, but first had them shown round the hospital so that it would never again be a place of mystery and fear to them. Other natives pretended to aches and pains they did not have, in the hope of treatment. Men and women with such diseases as malaria and bilharzia asked for the faradic current. They reasoned that if it could bend the intrepid Nonhla Kanipho to its will, there was nothing it could not do. It had become a cure-all.

There were enough genuine cases to double the work of the hospital. The staff worked almost frantically. Briggs, the superintendent, appealed urgently for more staff, which was promised. But it was not available yet and in the meantime the doctors and nurses were determined that no-one needing their care should be turned away.

And then, as suddenly as it had risen, the human flood subsided. Barrington could not understand it. From being rushed off his feet, he returned to his normal state of being slightly overworked. Dwindling numbers were reported from other departments as well. Many of the newly-enrolled out-patients did not reappear for treatment.

As usual, the white people were the last to learn what was happening. Barrington questioned several of his still-faithful patients, but they were evasive. It was the ploughing season, they said, and people were too busy to be sick. Then again, the white man's medicine had achieved such wonders already that there really wasn't much illness about. Barrington smiled grimly at that. He was not deceived.

And then from one of the native orderlies, he got the key to the mystery.

Nonhla Kanipho had bought a portable faradic battery.

Barrington had jested that it would cost her the price of half her cattle. But the witch-doctor must have had more cattle than he thought. She had sold barely a quarter of them.

Now that the white man knew the secret, his patients did not mind filling in some details. Yes, Nonhla Kanipho had had the machine for about ten days—the number of patients had dwindled as soon as the news of this wonder had spread round the kraals. It seemed that the witch-doctor had been making a tour of demonstration. In thinly-scattered settlements for miles around black legs were involuntarily bending and stretching.

The natives were too polite to speak their thoughts aloud to him, but Barrington could see how their minds were working. The witch-doctor's magic had always been powerful although after her defeat at Barrington's hands it was agreed that it was not as powerful as the white man's. But now that Nonhla Kanipho had the white man's machine she was possessed of his magic as well as her own. The hospital, on the other hand, had never troubled to acquire snake-skins, lions' fat and monkeys' paws, and so clearly it had fallen behind in the campaign against disease. Moreover, the natives no longer faced the hard choice of whose magic they should submit to—now they could have both, and at the same time give no offence to the witch-doctor, who was a dangerous enemy.

When Barrington worked out the implications he was no longer surprised that he had fewer patients. He was surprised that he still had any. And he cursed himself for not having shown Nonhla Kanipho the door right at the start.

In irritation he said to the hospital superintendent: "There ought to be a law against selling apparatus like that to these people!"

"Agreed. But I imagine it's never happened before. Nobody thought it ever could happen. I suppose she can't injure anyone?"

"No. The juice isn't strong enough. But she can put us out of business—and by heaven, that's what she looks like doing!"

"Any ideas?" asked Briggs. "You're a pretty good native linguist, aren't you?" He let the implication sink in.

"You don't suggest I go out and talk to the natives? Oh, I'd do it like a shot, but it wouldn't be any use."

"You never know."

"Actions speak louder than words," said Barrington, "and Nonhla Kanipho is giving the natives plenty of action."

Briggs grinned despite his anxiety. "Sure is. Bend . . . stretch. Bend . . . stretch."

"What the hell are we going to do?"

But the next step came from the witch-doctor herself. Two nights later Barrington answered a knock at the door of his bungalow, and found a small boy on the step.

"Nonhla Kanipho sent me," he explained in Zulu. "She sends you an invitation."

Barrington's eyes narrowed. "What sort of invitation?"

"She invites you to the great chief Lutisi's kraal at midday tomorrow, so that you may see her powerful medicine."

"It's like her damned nerve!" exploded Barrington. He was alarmed as well as angry. Chief Lutisi had always been friendly and co-operative, and he had a lot of pull with the natives. If he, too, could be won over by Nonhla Kanipho, the prestige of the white man's medicine, already low, would be practically non-existent.

The umfaan stood patiently, rubbing one bare foot against the other. "What message shall I take to Nonhla Kanipho, baas?"

Barrington thought a minute. "Tell her I'll be there," he snapped and went in, slamming the door. He knew the witch-doctor's motive: to humiliate him in front of the chief and his followers by making the white man a spectator of her magic. But if he refused to attend, Nonhla Kanipho would say that it was because he was envious of her powers. Either way it looked like defeat, but if he went to the chief's kraal there was just a slender chance that he would be able to turn the situation to his advantage.

So the next morning he set out. The kraal was two miles from the nearest road, and Barrington had to park his car and follow the native tracks. The day had dawned cool and cloudy, but now the sun appeared, and Barrington wished that he had been wearing shorts and bush-shirt instead of flannel trousers and a sports jacket. He did not need to ask the way; groups of natives were converging on the chiefs' kraal from every direction. They looked curiously at the over-dressed white man.

The kraal lay on top of a hill, and consisted of a big mud-and-wattle hut surrounded by smaller huts for each of Lutisi's ten wives. A great crowd of natives—Barrington thought there must have been at least five hundred—had gathered in a wide circle on the open veld near the kraal.

Chief Lutisi, a grizzled old man who looked as if his frame was rapidly shrinking to skin and bone, squatted on the ground in the centre of the circle. Next to him stood the grotesque figure of the witch-doctor; holding a suitcase in her great fist.

As the white man approached the ring, the ranks of the natives parted to let him through.

Barrington paid his respects to the chief, who acknowledged his salutation with a stately inclination of the head, but he ignored Nonhla Kanipho.

The witch-doctor grinned, and said, loudly enough for the tribesmen to hear: "So even the white doctor comes to see my magic. You are clever and you have strong medicine, but you do not have medicine as strong as mine." She struck her cotton-vested chest with the flat of her hand, and her beads rattled and swung.

Barrington ignored her, but he could tell from the murmuring of the crowd that her boast had been appreciated.

The chief raised his hand to give Nonhla Kanipho the signal to begin, and with a flourish she lifted the lid of the case, while the onlookers craned their necks.

With a submissive gesture towards the chief she offered to demonstrate her magic on him. But he shook his head and spoke to her in a cracked high-pitched voice. Barrington did not catch the words, but the meaning was clear enough: the chief, though interested and ready to be impressed, was not inclined to be a patient just yet. He beckoned to a tall native, one of his innumerable sons, who was conspicuous at the front of the crowd. The young man stepped forward and sat in the dust beside the witch-doctor.

With a flourish Nonhla Kanipho connected the apparatus to his thigh. Barrington could not repress a grudging admiration for her showmanship. The machine buzzed, the witch-doctor twisted the knobs and slowly the man's leg began to move. There was a gasp from hundreds of throats.

The sun was practically overhead, and Barrington mopped his brow with a handkerchief as the demonstration went on. One by one, the chief's sons and the chief's wives presented themselves for a dose of this strange medicine.

The novelty did not wear off. Each new demonstration of the faradic battery produced the same gasps of astonishment. Barrington wondered if he would be standing there all day.

Then, suddenly, something odd about the behaviour of the apparatus captured his experienced eye. It seemed that the witch-doctor was having to move the controls higher to get the same effects. So far the crowd had noticed nothing, but Nonhla Kanipho knew something was wrong. Abruptly she switched off, and snapped the suitcase shut.

Then Barrington knew. For the first time he addressed the crowd.

"What, Nonhla Kanipho, have you run out of magic? I was hoping that you would let me taste your medicine."

The witch-doctor stood silently, at loss for words, and Barrington appealed to the chief.

"Chief Lutisi, I have the honour to be your guest. Am I to be sent away without the benefit of the great Nonhla Kanipho's magic? That would be poor hospitality."

The chief was obviously impressed. He spoke to the witchdoctor, who shook her head and said: "There is no more magic today."

Lutisi grew angry. His high-pitched voice rose to something like a scream. "You may have strong medicine, Nonhla Kanipho, but that does not give you the right to disobey me, Lutisi, the slayer of lions. I command you: Grant the white man his wish."

Reluctantly the witch-doctor began to open the suitcase.

It was only then that Barrington realised that he would have to take his trousers off.

Here he remembered it afterwards as the most embarrassing moment of his life, when he stepped out of his shirt and underpants before the throng of natives. Although they wore less clothing than he, even without his trousers, the sight amused them hugely. A full-throated guffaw came from the back of the crowd, and the women took it up with their high-pitched cackles. Soon the entire audience rocked with mirth which echoed across the valleys. Even the chief, who did not want to show disrespect for a white man, could not help grinning. Only Nonhla Kanipho was not amused.

Barrington sat on the ground with such dignity as he could muster, and the witch-doctor sullenly applied the pads to his thigh and began to work the controls.

Barrington set his teeth and braced himself against the impact of the current. The faradic battery had been switched off for a few minutes, and started again with a flicker of its former power. Once, twice, Barrington's leg twitched, and then was still. Twist the controls as she might, Nonhla Kanipho could not make his leg move.

"Is that the best you can do?" Barrington taunted. "If your magic is stronger than mine, why is it powerless to move me?"

The murmuring of the crowd told its own story. Barrington had won.

Nonhla Kanipho looked round her in confusion. Then she gave one cry of rage, snatched up her machine, and strode angrily through the crowd. She was followed by the jeers of the black people.

Barrington forgot that he was standing in his underpants, and the natives did not laugh at him now. They crowded round, wide-eyed. Many touched him in the belief that this would give them some of his power. The white man's medicine had been vindicated.

"Nhlhla Kanipho knew a lot," Barrington told his wife that night, "but she didn't know that batteries have to be renewed." He yawned. "I'm for an early night—guess we'll all be extra busy tomorrow."